

Midway Gardens: A Demolished Wonder

Bryne Hadnott

Brookwood Junior High School, Glenwood

Teacher: Harry Daley

Midway Gardens was the most beautiful, cultural gardens in Illinois during the 1900s. One authority explained that in Midway Gardens, not only did Frank Lloyd Wright create an extraordinary architectural composition, but he overlaid the entire complex with intricate and original ornament. With the intricate designs, European influence, and interesting sculptures, Midway Gardens is among the most worldly piece of architecture ever created.

During 1913 in Germany, Frank Lloyd Wright, Edward C. Walker, and two partners created the Sans Souci Amusement Park. Waller had asked Wright to expand the amusement park and create an upper class beer-garden. Wright wanted to expand the Sans Souci beer-garden and stimulate culture in Chicago. He also wanted to turn the beer-garden into a concert-garden. It was to have all of the arts, such as concerts and gardening. It was supposed to be a German-styled entertainment building in South Chicago, but it would also cost \$350,000. The building was to have gardens outside and inside, clubs, casinos, a bar, dance floors, and concert rooms. All areas were created to connect to each other easily. Wright designed all of these elements, down to the last chair. Sculptor Alfonso Ianelli worked with him and made the sculptures that were placed in the gardens. He designed beautifully proportioned rooms, lantern-lighted hallways, and flowering terraces, according to one authority. Wright's ingenious ideas showed signs of Mayan, Indian, and Cuban art forms, even European art of the 1920-1930 era. The bricks and patterns used created a castle. There were different floors of space that were planned. Unusual angles made the Midway Gardens a most creative attraction in Chicago.

Once all the preparation was complete, Midway Gardens could finally be built. "Wright used reinforced cement and decorated cement blocks with relief designs reminiscent of Pre-Colombian Central American Mayan frieze . . . ," as one writer described it. When finished, Midway Gardens was six hundred feet in length on each side. Outdoor activities were usually performed there since it had a music stage, an area for eating, and two arcades. As planned, there were lobbies, a casino, private banquet halls, cigars and newspaper stands, pools, dance floors, and cantilevered balconies; it had everything. One famous trait of the Midway Gardens were the "Sprites." Alfonso Ianelli designed these. Some of the Sprites were based on shapes. Cube was one; Triangle, Octagon, and Sphere were the others. There were many more. A web site about the gardens described the sprites: "the Winged Sprite stood over the entrance and greeted visitors to the Gardens . . . the Solemn Sprite contemplated occupants of the summer garden . . . and the Maiden of Mud was on the left, overlooking one of the dance floors." Everything was decorated, painted glass, designed concrete, and strangely shaped lights. Brightly colored brick, tile, and beige walls also set the scene.

Tiered courtyards were in the back of the bandstand. Inside the winter garden was a hall that had balconies for eating near one of the dance floors. The winter garden gazebo had shaded arcades by five of the porches. Concert directors and a band stage were in the summer garden. Near the west, the bottom floors led to the garden doors; the balcony opened onto a high terrace. There were chandeliers on each corner. Midway Gardens was completed by architects Adler and Sullivan. On June 27, 1914, the Midway Gardens officially opened. It was a huge dining and bar complex. It took up an entire city block. A person could take their food from the restaurant and go to the garden, and sit on the grass while listening to a band. "It was a playground for the

eye and a pleasure for the spirit that was designed to offer facilities . . . ,” to use one authority’s words.

After two years, Midway Gardens began to decline in quality. It was sold to the Edelweiss Brewery and renamed Edelweiss Gardens on May 31, 1916. Two other dance floors were built onto it. They painted over the concrete and Sprites, and they stenciled on plain surfaces. In 1921, on August 31, Midway Gardens was sold to the E.C. Pietrich Midway Automobile Tire and Supply Company. The name was changed to Midway Dancing Gardens. At the very end, Midway Gardens was sold to the Sinclair Filling Station and Car Wash in 1929. After 15 years of decent business, Midway Gardens was closed and on October 10, 1929, Midway Gardens was reduced to rubble. It was put into Lake Michigan as a break wall. Ianelli took many of the Sprites home and saved them. Prohibition in America hit the Gardens hard.

Midway Gardens was officially destroyed. “The Midway Gardens project began in exuberance and ended ingloriously some 16 years later,” as one historian summarized the history. On this project, Wright, Ianelli, and Waller built a beautiful piece of art. They covered it with difficult and gorgeous trinkets. It began as initial sketches, drawings, and ideas with Wright, Ianelli, Waller and a small budget. Then it was built and the whole world could see the art of Midway Gardens. It ended in tragedy, but the beauty and sophistication of Midway Gardens is still widely known. [From Midway Gardens, “Midway Gardens’ Sprites,”

<http://www.anguish.org/~greyson/flw/index.shtml> (Oct. 13, 2003); Midway Gardens, “The 1914 Chicago Midway Gardens,” http://www.talariaenterprises.com/teeach/flw_archive.html (Oct. 13, 2003); Caroline Knight, *Essential Frank Lloyd Wright*; Paul Kruty, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Midway Gardens*; Yona Zeldis McDonough, *Frank Lloyd Wright*; Robin Sommer Langley, *Frank Lloyd Wright*; Edgar Tafel, *Apprentice and Genius*; Iain Thomson, *Frank Lloyd Wright*.]